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PRACTICAL WORKINGS OF MICHIGAN'S BIRTH REGISTRATION LAW.

BY WILLIAM F. PETRIE, CHIEF OF DIVISION, VITAL STATISTICS, MICHIGAN.

The accurate registration of births, as you all well know, is a subject requiring much consideration, and one upon which much time and thought has been spent in Michigan by registration officials and others. Births were enumerated in the State of Michigan by the supervisors and assessors, beginning with the year 1867, but the results were anything but satisfactory. Probably less than two-thirds of the births that actually occurred in the State were recorded under this system, and the particulars given in regard to the births reported were in many cases incomplete, and some of the statements were incorrect. This manner of reporting births is undoubtedly in vogue in many of your States, and how true the results are is well known to you.

After repeated efforts the Department succeeded in having a law for the immediate registration of births placed on the statute books at the session of the legislature for the year 1905. This law took effect on January 1, 1906, and from the very start has been a success. Like all new laws, however, it takes time to educate the people, and, although much publicity was given to the law, through the press and otherwise, some one is occasionally discovered who has not heard of the law, and seems surprised that they should be compelled to register a birth in their own family.

Considerable trouble was experienced for a few months after the adoption of the law on account of the antagonistic spirit displayed by some of the physicians, who declared that, owing to the fact that a fee was not provided for filing a certificate, the law was unconstitutional, and that they could not be compelled to do something for nothing and consequently would not file a certificate. Fortunately, they were convinced of their error without recourse to prosecution, yet I could see from the manner in which many of the doctors made their reports, that the antagonistic spirit was still there.

While I believe it is considered desirable by some authorities to offer inducements for the return of births by the payment of a small fee for each birth reported, and while it may prove an incentive in some cases, the main reliance for complete returns must rest upon enforcement

of the compulsory requirements of the law. The recent session of the legislature, however, made an amendment to the law, providing for a fee of fifty cents to be paid to the physicians, midwives, or nurses filing certificates of births. This amendment took effect on June 27, 1907, and there is no reason why every birth occurring in Michigan should not be reported, as the chief objection has been removed. The effect of this amendment is very noticeable, as many physicians who were very negligent in filing certificates are now filing their certificates within the ten-day limit.

The filing of the supplementary report of the given name of children was also a problem confronting the Department. The law provides that the report should be made by the physician or person filing the certificate, and in a great many instances the parents were not ready to name their child at the time of birth; and to compel the physician to make extra trips to obtain the name would undoubtedly in many cases work extreme hardship, especially in sparsely settled districts, where long drives would have to be made. Such extra trips were made in several instances by some of our physicians only to learn that the parents were not yet ready to name the child. In view of this fact the Department advised the physicians and others interested to file the certificates and, in all instances where the parent was not ready to name the child at the time of birth, to leave a supplemental blank with them, requesting that it be filed with the registrar as soon as the child was named. This plan has worked very well so far, but in a great many instances registrars have failed to report the names to the Department after being filed by the parent.

To secure the given names on certificates lacking this information for births filed during the year 1906, the Department in November, 1906, sent correction blanks to registrars for all certificates filed in the first six months of the year that lacked this item, and in June of the present year correction blanks were sent for the last six months of 1906. Many names were thus secured, so that the percentage of unnamed children born during the year 1906 and on file in the Department of State is very small. The amendment to the birth registration law, referred to above, requires a sworn itemized statement to be submitted by the physicians and others making claims for fees for certificates filed, and, as this statement is to be filed in the Department, it will undoubtedly contain the Christian names of many children not named on the original certificates, and thus enable the Department to complete the certificate.

There is still another method used by the Department to determine the accuracy of the birth returns; namely, a comparison of the returns of deaths with the returns of births, the ages determining whether a

birth certificate should have been filed since the birth registration law went into effect. This, of course, requires considerable labor, but the results obtained will, I believe, fully compensate for the time spent in checking them up, and many births will be registered that would have escaped registration, had it not been done. This is especially true of still-births, many physicians holding that it is not necessary or important that such births be reported. While not of any real statistical value, it is very important that they be reported, for in many instances physicians, in signing a death certificate, enters in the space provided for the cause of death the word "still-born," and in the space above the words "last saw him or her alive on blank date and that death occurred on date stated above." If they saw the child alive, then the notation "still-born" is incorrect, and it is the practice of the Department to treat all such returns of children as under one year of age for compilation purposes. In every instance where still-births are returned from any district as deaths, examination is immediately made to see if a birth certificate has been filed, and, if none has been returned, the physician is requested to file one immediately.

There is still another check on the returns made to the Department by the different registrars. The law requires that a list of the births filed with the different clerks of the State shall be furnished all supervisors and assessors. These last-mentioned officers are required, when making their annual assessment during the month of April, to make diligent inquiries whether any births have occurred in the families visited by them during the preceding calendar year, and, if they find any and the birth does not appear on the list furnished by the clerk, a certificate of the birth is immediately made out by them and filed with the clerk of the district in which the birth occurred. As a fee of twenty-five cents is provided for every birth certificate filed by these officers, it is reasonable to suppose that the work is done thoroughly and that not many births escape registration. There would be no possibility of any births remaining unreported if the assessors made a house-to-house cavass, as the law requires, but many of them fail to do so, and in consequence some births are liable to escape registration. For the year 1906 there were 224 births returned by the supervisors and assessors, but I do not anticipate that there will be nearly so large a number for the year 1907, owing to the fact that people are becoming better acquainted with the law and that the fee of fifty cents is now provided for the filing of the certificate.

The question may be asked, "Are all births occurring in Michigan registered?" Answering it honestly, I am compelled to say that I do not know. The different registrars of the State are requested to report to the Department any physician, midwife, or parent that fails to file

proper certificates with them, and every month brings many such reports. The Department then takes the matter up, and in most instances the reports are filed promptly, but I presume that a number of births occur throughout the State for which certificates are not filed and no report made to the Department.

For the five years immediately preceding the year 1906 the average number of births returned yearly by the supervisors and assessors under the old law was about 43,000, while for the first year under the new law there were about 60,000 birth certificates returned, which is nearer the correct average of births each year.

The figures published by the Bureau of the Census affirm this view. They give the annual average rate of increase between the years 1900 and 1904 as 27,259. This corresponds so closely to the rate of increase (namely, 28,000), obtained by subtracting the average deaths (about 32,000) from the average number of births (about 60,000) that I am safe in believing over 95 per cent. of the births that occur in Michigan in the course of a year are registered.